

12 tips for improving your next speech

You've been asked to give a speech.

Congratulations!

You're about to participate in a proud tradition of oratory that stretches back over 2,000 years. Speeches have moved nations, comforted us, celebrated our achievements, paid tribute, changed attitudes and laws, and called us to action.

They mark every area of our lives: weddings, funerals, commencements, business functions, local and national assemblies.

Now it's *your* turn to speak.

"Holy cow!" you say, panic-stricken. "Why me? What am I going to say? How will I say it?"

Relax. The situation is not so dire.

Giving a speech can be a rewarding experience that brings honor on you and your organization.

But it does take time and effort to do well.

Here are 12 tips for making your next speaking engagement pleasurable and triumphant.

1. Narrow your topic.

Many subjects are too broad to be covered in a single talk. Focus on one issue or question that can be addressed comfortably in the time allotted. For example: Instead of talking about the state of education in our nation's high schools, restrict your discussion to the importance of preserving arts programs in secondary curriculums.

2. Make your speech relevant.

What does your audience need or want from you? What does your talk have to do with them? Every group has its own interests. Be mindful of the issues important to those you're addressing and shape your talk accordingly. Speaking to a teenage audience on the perils of drunk driving will differ from a presentation to the insurance industry on the same subject.

3. Research your audience.

As important as knowing what you're going to say is knowing to whom you're going to say it. It takes research to understand the make-up of your audience. Some things to consider: What are their ages? Their education background? The proportion of males and females? Their political, cultural and social beliefs? What is their awareness level about your topic? Will you be addressing experienced peers or untutored beginners? An informed understanding of your audience can help you tailor your talk appropriately. For example: Lifelong gun owners will expect one kind of speech; those who support a ban on handguns another.

4. Research the time and place of your talk.

When and where you speak should factor into your preparation. People attending a breakfast meeting had to rise early and may not be fully awake or may have to dash off to work. Keep your remarks particularly brief. Late night audiences will be less receptive to an overly-serious or urgent presentation. The size of the room is important, too. Addressing a crowd in a large auditorium lends itself to broad oratorical flourishes, whereas the smaller venue of a conference room is better suited for a more intimate tone.

5. Give your speech a logical structure.

You're writing for the ear, not the eye. The audience doesn't have the printed text of your speech in front of them. They can't go back and reread passages. They're dependent on the speaker to make it easy for them to follow. This takes a clearly defined structure. Perhaps the most familiar advice is: "Tell 'em what you're going to tell 'em. Tell 'em. Then tell 'em what you just told them." Other ways to organize your talk: chronologically, alphabetically, geographically, problem/solution, numerically, cause/effect.

6. Use a formal outline.

Some critics debate the necessity of this step, arguing that it stifles creativity. On the other side, it ensures that you'll

make all your points in a logical sequence. It shows you the architecture of your speech, revealing the strengths and weaknesses of your approach.

7. Prefer short sentences.

Short or shorter sentences let the audience keep up with your thoughts, but don't overdo it. Vary your sentence length. Break complex sentences into smaller manageable parts. Again, write for the ear, not the eye.

8. Be clear in your word choice.

Some words that look correct on the page are confusing on the stage; in particular, words that sound alike but which have different meanings. Simple solution: Read your speech aloud. Whenever you come across a potentially confusing or hard-to-pronounce word, find a substitute.

9. Use different linguistic devices.

They help you connect with your audience, touch them on an emotional level, reinforce your theme, corroborate your points, and more. The speechwriter's toolbox is especially rich, containing: rhetorical questions... comparisons and contrasts... anecdotes... case studies... statistics... quotations... stories... similes, metaphors and analogies.

10. Use quotes sparingly.

Quotations in a speech are like spices in a stew: a few go a long way, so insert them judiciously. Some authorities suggest a maximum of three outside quotations. Keep in mind that a quote doesn't have to come from a well-known source. Sometimes the insights of those around

us work well. They have the added benefit of freshness: it's unlikely your audience will be familiar with your spouse's observations.

11. Practice your speech!

I can't stress this enough. If a speech is worth giving, it's worth giving well. This entails rehearsal. Read your speech aloud more than once to yourself or into a recorder or before a small group of friends. What sounds good in your "mind's ear" may sound quite different when spoken. Practicing corrects missteps in private and minimizes public embarrassments.

12. Keep your speeches short. Some experts, such as William Safire, say speeches should be no longer than 20 minutes. That may or may not be the golden benchmark, but this much is true: the longer your speech, the easier your audience will lose focus.

If you're having a hard time writing an upcoming speech, contact me today at <http://www.robertlerose.com>.

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